Mad Max and the Dungeon Master by brodie-wan

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Summary: One shot in which Max confronts Mike about is moody jerkiness. Could be considered a missing scene before El see's Mike and Max in the gym or it could stand alone. Enjoy.

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Mad Max had never had to work so hard to make friends. Dustin and Lucas had been easy because they were unabashedly sweet on her. But, Mike Wheeler was not so easily taken in. It wasn't that she needed all of the boys to 'ooh and ahh' over her, but she was tired of being the new kid in a new school in the middle of nowhere. As much as she hated to admit it, she wanted to belong; she was desperate to be part of something. If Mike didn't approve, she was dead in the water. If his attitude had simply been indifference, she could deal with that, but he was adamant that she stay out of the party. That would not do. She was an all or nothing kind of girl for good or ill. Max decided to confront Wheeler and have it out once and for all.

She found him at lunch sitting with Will on the science lab steps. Oddly, Lucas and Dustin weren't there. She was kind of bummed that they would miss the fireworks. Oh, well. She set her face on fierce, as Lucas was fond of saying, and approached the two nerds directly.

When Mike saw her, his face fell, or at least hardened, which was no better. He elbowed Will lightly and nodded in her direction. If she didn't know better, Wheeler must have thought he was a T-Bird straight out of *Grease.* Will raised is eye brows in anticipation of the 'Mad' on Max's face.

She pulled up in front of them casting a shadow that enveloped both boys. She put her hands on her hips, but it immediately felt lame so she let them hang at her sides.

"Hey, Max," said Will, kindly. "What's up?"

"Not much, Byers," she replied, cordially, turning to Mike. "I got a bone to pick with this jerk."

"Okay," he said, smiling nervously and looking out on to the commons.

"So…" Mike said, dully. "What's up Max?"

His confrontational attitude infuriated her and she was a split second from kicking him in the face, Billy style.

"I want to kick you in the face!" she blurted, clinching her fists. "You're being a stubborn idiot and it needs to stop."

Mike appeared unphased by this and took a bite of his sandwich. He looked her in the eye. "I told you that the party is full, Max. We have a Mage. She just isn't present right now."

"Not present?" she snapped. "You mean missing, right? Presumed dead?

Max knew she had crossed the line as soon as the words escaped her lips. Lucas had told her all about Eleven and how important she was to the party, Mike especially.

"Look, Mike, I-"

"Shut up, Max!" Mike said, angrily, standing to his feet. "Just shut up!

She had never seen Mike this mad. He face was twisted with rage and what looked like grief. He stepped into her space, but she did not move.

"El is not dead. She may be missing like you said, but that doesn't mean dead. It also doesn't mean you can show up and take her place. Get lost, Max."

"I'm not going anywhere, Mike," she declared, standing her ground. "Lucas and Dustin are down with me joining the group. I bet Will doesn't have a problem either. Do you, Will?"

Will was brought out of his reverie and saw both Max and Mike looking at him. "What?"

"Nevermind," said Max, turning her attention back to Mike.

"Lucas and Dustin only want you in the group because they *like* you," Mike stated between clenched teeth. "I don't have that problem. By

the way, have you even thought about how that little triangle is going to work out? Not well for the party, I can guarantee that."

Max screwed up her face. "I don't care if they *like* me. I don't like either one of those clowns. Not that way."

Mike was shaking his head at her comments. "It doesn't matter, Max. They'll start one upping each-"

"How they Hell do you know what they'll do?" she interjected. "You have a lot of experience with girls, do you, Mike?"

Mike seemed to run out of gas before her very eyes. The party's fearless leader folding like a house of cards. His hard face softened and it returned to the general melancholy it always had.

He sat down again, looked at Will, probably to let him know he hadn't forgotten about him. Then, like his friend, stared out into the commons. He didn't look at her.

"Leave us alone, Max," was all he said.

Ironically, she felt no pride in her 'victory'. She had faced down the 'Dungeon Master' and instead of satisfaction, she felt more like her pit of desperation had grown. The confrontation was a failure and, now, she knew it was the wrong approach to begin with. She stood there before them, having been dismissed, but not willing to give up yet. It was not in her to beg, but if she wanted to break through Wheeler's wall of opposition, she would need to do something similar. There was a fine line between humility and humiliation. In the first, you have a choice. In the second you don't (at least most of the time). Max had a choice; a choice to lay down her pride, to open herself up to the possibility of the second and hope that the Mike Wheeler she had heard so much about was still in there somewhere.

She kneeled down in front of the two friends, which was only a step of two below them, and sat back on her haunches. This got their attention. They were no longer looking past her, but at her.

"What are you doing?" Mike asked, clearly surprised.

"I hope you'll listen me, Mike," she said, quietly. "I'm sorry I called

you and idiot. I'm sorry I wanted to kick you in the face.

Will cracked a smile at that.

"More than that, I'm sorry I made it sound like Eleven was dead. I don't know her. I barely know you, but it's pretty evident that you all went through some crazy shit. I'm sorry she's not here. I hope you find her. I don't want to take her place, Mike. I just want a place of my own.

Despite himself, Mike seemed to be listening. He didn't say anything. So she continued.

"You've seen my jackass stepbrother. Need I say more? I know I'm new, Mike. I know you and your friends have known each other since you were babies. I know Eleven was new, but she was-is special. I don't want to take her place. Based on what Lucas told me, that's not even possible. Just don't shut me out without giving me a chance."

In a completely unexpected move, Will jumped up and gave her a hug. Then sat back down next to Mike.

Mike let a small laugh escape his face as he looked at Will. He took a deep breath and regarded her.

"Let's get one thing straight, right off the bat," Mike said, soberly. "Eleven is not dead.

Max thought this was headed in the right direction.

"Secondly," he continued, now softening his tone. "Thanks for what you said. It took a lot of guts. I'm the one that should be sorry for being such an ass to you. None of us have exactly been ourselves lately. Will you forgive me?"

Max blinked. This had gone from bad to ugly, but was miraculously moving toward good. She let out a sigh of relief.

"Not a problem," she replied, shaking her head at the drama of it all. "I'm used to people being a jerk to me. But, I'm glad it's over. It is over, right?"

Mike smiled, and this one met his eyes. "It's over. In fact, I'll be talking to Lucas and Dustin about adding that Zoomer they're so hot and heavy about. There will have to be an official vote of the party to approve you. But, as far as I'm concerned, you're in."

Mike extended his hand and Max took it and shook it deliberately. "Thanks, Mike. But now that the air between us is clear, don't expect me to kneel again in any way, shape, or form. Mad Max is back."

"I think that's good thing," Mike replied. "She's the one we need."

She sat with Mike and Will for the remainder of the lunch period and went back inside with them at the ringing of the bell. They parted there and Max drifted through the remainder of the day content in the knowledge that she wouldn't be alone anymore.